

ABSTRACT

DISSERTATION: Trespassing Borderlines: Gender and the West in North African Literature

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This study examines how contentions about the influence of the West shape North African feminist responses to Islamic and national discourses on gender. Focusing on the works of Fatima Mernissi, Leila Abouzeid, Ahlam Mosteghanemi, and Nawal El Saadawi, the study stresses the need to go beyond the dichotomy of subservience and resistance to the West. Unless adequately contextualized, these notions hardly elucidate the complexity of North African feminist literature. This applies even when this literature employs the rhetoric of Western modernity or renounces orientalism. The study therefore argues that these feminists occupy a contentious ideological space that eludes rigid ideological designations like Islamism, nationalism, and Westernization despite the influence of some normative aspects of these discourses on their views on gender. By building upon postcolonial and feminist theories and focusing on these authors' (semi)autobiographical prose, the study draws on the explicit and implicit narrative gestures they employ to reveal how they circumvent potential accusations of Westernization. This empowers them to assert the legitimacy of their gender reform to their indigenous audiences. However, I demonstrate that the desire for authenticity signals feminism's struggle with its outsider status in postcolonial North Africa due to the mistrust that patriarchal ideologies show towards feminists who are recognized or celebrated in Western academia.